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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000424

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAL](#) [IZ](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: YOUNG OMANIS SOUND OFF ON REGIONAL ISSUES,
DEMOCRACY

REF: A. MUSCAT 169

[1](#)B. 07 MUSCAT 1040

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During a recent meeting with the Ambassador, a group of young professionals shared their views on Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, democracy, and the public image of the U.S. Participants were downbeat on Iraq and thought it was inevitable that the U.S. would withdraw its troops from the country. The group criticized the U.S. for its "one sided" support of Israel, but also blamed the Palestinians for the continuing conflict in the West Bank/Gaza. Opinions on democracy were divergent, with some claiming the country was not ready for Western-style democratic governance, while others favored its immediate, albeit gradual introduction. All agreed, however, that democracy cannot be "imposed" from the outside. Both Arab and Western media outlets were fingered for promoting negative images of, respectively, the U.S. and Arab countries to their audiences. To improve public perception of the U.S., the group did not call for whole-scale policy shifts, but recommended a more thorough explanation of U.S. policies and goals. End Summary.

PESSIMISTIC VIEWS ON IRAQ

[1](#)2. (C) In the third of a series of Embassy-sponsored small group discussions designed to gauge the candid opinions of Omanis on selected subjects (refs A, B), the Ambassador hosted 23 young professional men and women from the private sector at his residence on May 13. The conversation started with a focus on Iraq. Most participants held a pessimistic view of the situation there and expressed a belief that the U.S. would have little choice but to withdraw troops from Iraq due to domestic pressures and other factors. While one woman voiced her view that a pull-out of U.S. troops should occur quickly, several in the group cautioned that a withdrawal should only be conducted in "well thought-out phases." "It would be extremely irresponsible," one Omani stated, to remove U.S. troops before Iraqi forces were prepared to fill the resulting void. Both Western and Arab media outlets were identified for promoting negative public perceptions vis-a-vis the U.S. and Arab countries to their respective audiences

PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

[1](#)3. (C) The topic of democracy generated considerable interest among the group, as well as divergent opinions. One female participant expressed her firm belief that a Western-style democratic political system required "civic

education" and a general public understanding of the concept before it could be introduced in a country such as Oman. Otherwise, she warned, democracy could be misused to "hurt minority groups." Another participant strongly disagreed, stating that democracy could immediately be introduced in Oman, albeit "gradually in certain areas." A majority of the group agreed that democracy, although not necessarily as defined in the West, should be encouraged in Oman, but also be allowed to develop in accordance with Oman's culture and traditions.

¶4. (C) When asked by the Ambassador for their opinions on U.S. programs supporting democracy in Oman, most participants responded that they were not aware of any such programs. (Note: Public recognition of U.S. reform-related assistance in Oman, including programs under the Middle East Partnership Initiative, is constrained by sensitivities in the government, media and fledgling NGO community. End Note.) Several in the group shared their impressions, formed in part by what they saw and read in the media, that the U.S. was "too heavy handed" in trying to advance its version of democracy in the Arab world. Group consensus was that democracy could never be successfully "imposed" on a country. Instead, several argued, each state must be allowed to plot its own political course and "determine its own destiny." One Omani man, in reference to Hamas' victory in Palestinian elections in 2006, asked whether the U.S. would accept the results of a democratic election in a regional state that resulted in a "fundamentalist religious regime" assuming political power.

¶5. (C) A handful of participants asserted that the adoption of democratic governments throughout the globe had "failed to

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solve world problems." Poverty, for example, continued to be a major problem in many democracies, they stated. Two group members, who had participated in Embassy-sponsored exchange programs recently, drew a negative link between Western-style democracy and excessive consumerism and materialistic values. "We don't want America's problems in Oman," they remarked.

CRITICISM OF THE U.S., ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

¶6. (C) Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one Omani joked that he had a simple solution: "The U.S. should stop supporting Israel!" Most others, however, voiced the opinion that the U.S. needed to adopt a more "balanced" approach and that the U.S. was currently too "one-sided" to play the role of a neutral mediator. A few participants stated that the U.S. could not continue to "ignore" Hamas, especially since it won the most votes in the latest Palestinian national elections.

¶7. (C) Criticism of the U.S. and Israel by the group did not translate into unqualified support or praise for the Palestinians. Rather, several participants stated that the Palestinians bore at least some responsibility for their current situation. One young woman accused Palestinians living abroad of failing to contribute to the welfare of their countrymen in the West Bank/Gaza.

OVERCOMING NEGATIVE IMAGES

¶8. (C) The final subject of discussion was the public image of the U.S. in the Arab world. Several Omanis said that negative views of the U.S. in the region, as well as perceived Western suspicions towards Arabs and Muslims, was due in large part to the media. Both Western and Arab media outlets, they argued, were "too slanted" towards the biases of their own nationals and played on people's emotions through vivid imagery and provocative language. To improve

its image in the region, the group interestingly enough did not emphasize a major course correction in U.S. policies. Several participants instead advised the U.S. to "slow down" and better explain its positions in order to increase public understanding, and perhaps even acceptance, of its motives and goals.

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